

*THE WORK OF
JOHN S. SARGENT*





MADAME GAUTREAU.
PORTRAIT BY JOHN S. SARGENT.

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JOHN S. SARGENT

By Royal Cortissoz

MR. SARGENT'S princely rank in modern painting was conferred upon him at his birth. In his career, which already has entered into the history of art as something singular and important, every condition has been favorable. All things, from the start, conspired to make him a painter, and even in his student days he possessed the instinctive authority over his brushes which, in an age of technicians, is nevertheless rare. The point means more than is immediately obvious. Scores of modern painters paint so well that in any exhibition, until the self-confessed amateurs are reached, a certain workmanlike standard is taken as a matter of course. But look beneath the surface in any collection of contemporary pictures, and a surprising number of celebrated names are found to spell one of two things—mechanism or effort. Mr. Sargent's name does not spell either. Bred in the studio of a Parisian of the Parisians, he has never adopted any of the hollow tricks of the Salonier, who reduces execution to a science, and calls it art; and, paradoxically, while "the way in which he does it" is a matter of perpetual interest to his critics, he offers in his work the proof of Mr. Whistler's maxim, that "a picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared."

I am aware of the danger in approaching Mr. Sargent along these cheerful lines. For the last two or three years he has tyrannized over the Royal Academy in a way well calculated to make a great many excellent mediocrities hate the sight of his

productions. It has been a case of Eclipse first, and the rest nowhere. One show in particular at Burlington House—it was, I think, in 1900—I vividly remember. The vast wall space was, as usual, more than well covered. I scrutinized every inch of it with care, and an open mind. Literally, every canvas that had something profitable to say for itself was a Sargent. His peers have accepted the situation with amiability. But a mild reaction has recently set in, and as Mr. Sargent is not able, any more than any other man, to strike twelve every time he paints a picture, he has been terribly taken to task for his failures; divers critics have been finding out that he hasn't really any genius at all, but is simply one more "talent"—of a rather unusual order, to be sure, but still only a talent. For my own part, the shock of one of his failures has always been especially distressing; it has come with a weight in proportion to its source. But why in the world it should set any one to a solemn shaking of the head over the painter of the "Carmencita," or the "Miss Beatrice Goelet," or the "Asher Wertheimer, Esq.," it is difficult to perceive. Most of the Jeremiads intoned over him, apropos of an unsuccessful portrait, actually amount to this: that he does not paint like somebody else, like Titian, or Rembrandt, or Gainsborough, or Degas. Better a hundred failures than the one most humiliating of all—the failure to paint like himself.

He has been his own inspiration from the outset, a fact redoubled in interest when his early environment is considered.

He was born in Florence (in 1856), and I suppose the future historian will accordingly look for traces of Italian art in his development. They lurk, presumably, in the copies of Venetian portraits which he is said to have made, and, doubtless, in boyish sketch-books thus far hidden from the public. Certainly, too, the scenes of his youth must be counted among those favorable conditions to which allusion has been made above. No one with the artistic temperament could live, at the most impressionable of all ages, among the masterpieces of the Southern schools, and not

of the "Croizette," the "Sabine," and other memorable canvases of the seventies and thereabouts. These were among the first-fruits of a reorganized state of affairs, and, it may be remarked in passing, Mr. Sargent is inconceivable save as a follower of the new, essentially modern régime.

It is interesting to consider the situation in Paris as he confronted it on his arrival twenty or twenty-five years ago. By that time the Barbizon painters had begun to reap the rewards of their long struggle with adversity, and impressionism had made



Study for "Carnation Lily, Lily Rose."

experience a fertilization of his nature, a purification of his taste. But whatsoever he may have derived, in the way of stimulus or suggestion, from the linear charm of the Tuscan Primitives, the plastic power of the North Italians, or the sensuous beauty of the Venetians, he has kept to himself. When the time for his apprenticeship arrived he gravitated to Paris as naturally and, from all we know to the contrary, as little encumbered with prejudice, as any American leaving New York or Boston for the artistic workshop of the world. He found there the one teacher, as it seems to me, best fitted to his own aptitudes—Carolus Duran. Not the Duran of that specious virtuosity which of late years has glittered in the Salon with the gaudy pride of fashionable vulgarity itself, but the Duran

some of its most violent excursions into the enemy's country. But the enemy was not by any means to be ejected in a day from his Academic citadel, and, moreover, to the young painter then feeling his way, the official exhibitions presented appeals which it would have required some courage and more stupidity for him to disdain. The truth is that there was a good deal going on in the Paris of Mr. Sargent's salad days which did not need a novel label to recommend it. Academic ideals were waning, but not all the Academicians, or all their fellow-believers in the artistic principles handed down by the fathers, were committed to a soulless routine. If Cabanel was painting his correct and cold presentments of the *grande dame* of his day, Bonnat was modelling, with a kind of brutal en-

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"Carnation Lily, Lily Rose."

ergy, portrait after portrait of the statesman, the poet, and the soldier, and making them anything but cold. Degas himself, creating a new school, was not unmindful of an old one. He emulated, in his independent way, the classicist he adored—Ingres. There appeared in a New York gallery not long ago a souvenir of Degas in this backward-glancing mood of his, a portrait of a woman, which was a little sermon in itself against always looking for the virtues of change where change is most manifest. In some of its aspects this painting might pass for a page from the ante-im-

the more interesting to observe if we see it going on, not amid the harmonious teachings of a single school, but in a time of many movements and in one of transition into the bargain. The choice of a definite line of action at such a time involves the use of so much the more judgment and individuality. One point it is important to remember. Mr. Sargent, studying under the wing of Carolus Duran, was in an atmosphere sympathetic to new ideas, but not at all inhospitable to old ones. While he emerged from his master's studio a modern in the best sense of the term, it was



Study for "Carnation Lily, Lily Rose."

pressionistic era. It has in it the sobriety and the rectitude of Ingres himself, and draws near to the "finish," while it assuredly possesses the solidity, characteristic of many an Academician. The note in the thing, of an aim new at that time, lies altogether in the quality of its execution, in the personal treatment of a scheme entirely impersonal, in beauty of modelling and tone.

It is the fashion to enhance applause of an innovator by contempt of the men he has risen to supplant. As a matter of fact there were capable painters before Manet, and contemporary with him, who had no impulse toward his subversive tendencies, and the formation of Mr. Sargent's style is

with a vein of conservatism in him which has never disappeared. Of how many modern painters, endowed as he has been with superabundant technical brilliance, could it be said that they have never exceeded a certain limit of audacity? I know of no canvas of his which could fairly be called sensational. One of the least conventional of painters, his art nevertheless remains adjusted to the tone and movement of the world in which he lives—surely a fine example of genius expressing its age. Like Degas, in the portrait aforesaid, he has poured new wine into an old bottle without breaking the bottle.

Thus far I have taken it for granted that it is of Sargent the portrait-painter we are



Mrs. Henry G. Marquand.

speaking, yet his predestination to that rôle, which has since been made unmistakable, is not clear in the opening incidents of his career. He painted portraits, but he painted other things, notably some Spanish and Venetian subjects out of which he got so much of the charm of Southern picturesqueness, without any of its factitious and theatrical elements, that if he were not indispensable in portraiture one might sigh for his return to the freedom and variety of

but I retain as clearly as though I had seen them yesterday, a sense of the vitality in them; of their charm as of motives taken from common life and lifted at once out of the commonplace. The figures are so effectively placed, the light and shade playing about them are so skilfully directed, the touch is so fresh and so sure. Here is, in short, what Mr. Sargent, the painter of such subjects, always gives us—a sane and winning naturalism.



Italian With Rope.

the casual composition. I say "casual" advisedly, for some of the most characteristic of the earlier works I have in mind are, if not exactly unstudied, at all events chiefly admirable for the spontaneity and almost artless vivacity with which they record impressions of things seen. One of them is "A Street in Venice," in which two cloaked idlers watch a girl who passes them, her shawl drawn close about her, her face toward the spectator. "Venetian Bead Stringers," which dates apparently from the same period, is a shadowy interior with three figures. It is a long time since I have seen either of these paintings,

Sometimes it has taken a delicately romantic tone. In a volume of "Spanish and Italian Folk-Songs," published by Miss Alma Strettell in 1887, six of the twelve illustrations are by Mr. Sargent. The frontispiece is a sketch of a gypsy dance, with figures thrust forth from, or almost buried in, mysterious gloom. One of the plates in the body of the book is of a quaint image of the Madonna such as Southern peasants worship. In a second a woman draws back in terror from the mystic message of the cards whose power she has invoked; in a third a dancer, with superb gesture, is drawn with wonderful



Johannes Wolf.

feeling for rhythmic motion; the next subject is a dainty garden scene, and the last is a Crucifixion. In all the drawings there is an emotion not of the surface, a hint that the painter has caught the strain of *macabre* poetry in his material. But even in these one cannot but feel that his salient faculty is that of the artist who labors most fruitfully "with his eye on the object," not with

does not want to be swamped, and speculating as to whether this painting of his, in subject, scale, and treatment, would "do." Decidedly it would do. "El Jaleo" is the kind of picture that "makes a hole in the wall." It would hold its own amid a host of *machins*. But I cannot imagine Mr. Sargent allowing anything of the *machin* to creep into it. He must know the lan-



Bedouin Arab.

his imagination hovering around its inner secrets. How secure he has ever been from drifting, through this purely visual preoccupation, into the cruder naturalism of the French school—the influence of which was in the air in his younger days—is shown, even more than in these fugitive smaller essays, by the large picture of a Spanish dance, "El Jaleo," which he sent to the Salon of 1882 and which was for some years lent to the Fine Arts Museum of Boston by the gentleman in that city to whom it belongs.

I can imagine Mr. Sargent contemplating an inroad upon the Salon, remembering the conditions imposed by that storm-tossed arena upon the contributor who

guage of the Parisian studios, but he does not speak it in his work. Perhaps it is his Florentine up-bringing, steadying his taste; perhaps it is his effortless originality. Whatever the safeguard, he is as free from the *cliché*—and from vulgarity—in "El Jaleo" as he is, say, in his portrait of "Miss Beatrice Goelet," a painting in which the innocent sweetness of childhood unfolds itself like a flower. "El Jaleo," though it was in the Salon, was not of it. Like the Venetian studies just cited, it is a piece of naturalistic painting; every ingredient of visible passion, grace, and Spanish glamour which belongs to the famous dance, as I have seen it again and again in Seville and Madrid, is reflected as in a mir-



Egyptian Woman with Coin Necklace.

ror; but there is no tincture of the photograph there. Merely as a realistic record of facts this makes the numerous studies of the same theme which have passed through the Salon, look forced and garish, its realism being of the higher order. Put its veracity aside and you still have what is, after all, the thing most worth having in the circumstances,—a beautiful work of art, beautiful in its rich darks, its luminous yet restrained yellows, its grouping of some eight or ten figures in a design which seems simplicity itself—until you take the trouble to analyze the balance of its movement, and the subtle co-ordination of its values. What holds one, moreover, in this production of a young man still in his twenties, is its astonishing aplomb; the ease and keen unhackneyed “attack” with which the thing is done, proclaim a painter who has “arrived” and with whom modern art will henceforth have to reckon. It has been reckoning with him ever since, now breathless with admiration, now full of impatience and indignation over some ill-considered piece of work, but never indifferent.

One way of emphasizing this point is to face the fact that for years Mr. Sargent has sent scarcely anything save portraits to the exhibitions. A great portrait is one of the greatest things in the world, but it is not, to-day, the portrait-painter of whom one would ordinarily hear most. The subject-picture has a way of taking the centre of the stage, and in the twenty years and more that have elapsed since “El Jaleo” was painted, Mr. Sargent has done nothing save the charming “Carnation Lily, Lily Rose,” to follow up the success of that work. His decorations for the Boston Public Library occupy a place apart in his activity, and form in no sense a sequence to his early triumph. Possibly we have lost by his abstention, though it may be that he gives us all that it is really delightful to have, outside of his portraiture, in such studies and sketches as those with which he amuses himself when on his travels, and in the intervals of painting portraits at home. At any rate, a good portrait by him has an interest quite as potent as that of a subject-picture. This, which is so true of him to-day, has never been truer than it was when he was only nearing the threshold of his present extraordinary vogue. I might cite in evidence that noted portrait which he

painted, in 1879, of his master, in worthy requital of all that Carolus Duran had done in teaching him the rudiments of his profession. But an apter illustration is provided by the full-length he made of a famous Parisian beauty, Madame Gautreau. That inspiring personality we may see also in a brilliant half-length by Courtois, and it is most instructive to compare the two. The Frenchman’s work is a polished piece of draughtsmanship. He has handled his motive somewhat in the vein of an old Florentine or Milanese profile, and has achieved a pure distinction in the contour, a delicacy in the tone, by virtue of which he has carried the panel through one exhibition after another, undiminished in its prestige. Sargent’s much larger portrait, which he sent to the Salon two years after “El Jaleo,” is inferior to it in linear austerity, and in atmosphere, as of something sculpturesque and fragile. But in everything else it is a much more striking performance. I need not pause upon the technique, save to note that it has a good deal of the characteristic Sargent effulgence, and an elasticity and breadth to which Courtois could lay no claim. What is important is the conception, which is as modern and personal as the other is neo-Italian and Academic; and in addition there is the masterful accent of the man born to paint portraits, born to draw from each of his sitters the one unforgettable and vital impression which is waiting for the artist.

People complain that Mr. Sargent violates the secret recesses of human vanity, and brings hidden, because unlovely, traits out into the light of day; that his candor with the brush is startling, to say the least, and sometimes even perilous. He is accused not simply of painting his sitter, “wart and all,” but of exaggerating the physical or moral disfigurement. If this is true there is something humorous in the spectacle, which is constantly being presented, of men and women running the risk. But the risk is not so great as it seems. Take the portrait of Madame Gautreau. It is no encroachment upon the privacy of that lady to consider both portraits of her with brief reference to their original, and to observe that while Courtois gives us an enchanting variation on his theme, Sargent’s canvas vibrates with the



Miss Octavia Hill.

exquisite quality of the theme itself, in all its integrity. That is his great gift. He does not betray his sitter. He takes his or her essential traits and makes them the stuff of a kind of pictorial demonstration, interesting us in them profoundly. Few of his sitters seem, as we see them on the canvas, to have been passive on his hands. The electric currents of a duel are in the air.

to strike Mr. Sargent as a factor in portraiture of no less constructive importance than form or color is simply one of the proofs of his adequacy.

There is a good story of the late Coventry Patmore and the portrait of him by Mr. Sargent which now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Mr. Basil Champneys, in his biography of the poet, relates that



Portrait Sketch.

Character has thrown down its challenge, the painter has taken it up, and the result is a work in which character is fused with design, plays its part in the artistic unit as powerfully, and almost as vividly, as any one of the tangible facts of the portrait. Where Madame Gautreau has received a happier commemoration at Sargent's hands than at those of Courtois, has been in the greater extent to which the American has allowed her to co-operate, as it were, with him. Her style, her atmosphere, the last, most evanescent perfume of her individuality, help enormously to make this portrait appealing not simply as a portrait, but as a painting. I cannot see in this any of the "risk" to which I have just referred. Complaint is apt to come, I fear, from those who cannot understand that the business of the portrait-painter is to tell the truth. That the truth happens

when the work was finished and he went down to Lymington to see what the original declared to be "the best portrait which Sargent, or probably any other painter, had ever painted," it struck him as inclining toward caricature. Patmore asked for his opinion. "I told him," says Mr. Champneys, "that if the picture had been extended downwards there must have appeared the handle of a whip, and that he would then have been fully revealed as a sort of Southern planter on the point of thrashing his slaves and exclaiming, 'You damned niggers!'" Patmore was pleased. "He always delighted in any tribute to his grasp of active life, and prided himself on his power of dealing blows to the adversary." Mr. Sargent had missed the aspect of "seer," which in later years had alone seemed to Mr. Champneys characteristic of his friend. Is posterity the loser? Will



A Venetian Interior.

it receive a false impression of Patmore? I doubt it.

In the light of the long procession of portraits which he has put to his credit, it seems to me that if there is a living painter in whose interpretations of character confidence can be placed, it is Mr. Sargent. His range is apparently unlimited. He has painted Carmencita in all the pomp and insolence of her mundane beauty; and not only in the "Miss Beatrice Goelet," but in the "Hon. Laura Lister," the "Homer St. Gaudens," the

"Master Goodrich," and "The Boit Children," he has treated adolescence with the most searching understanding. He has painted men and women in their prime and in their old age, and in whatever walk of life he has found them, he has apprehended them with the "seeing eye" that is half the battle. Actors, actresses, lawyers, architects, soldiers, painters, statesmen, poets, noblemen, commoners, men of affairs, and nobodies, all these has he painted and painted well, and, besides, he has portrayed the woman of fashion, in her infinite



Dante and Virgil.
Sketch for an illustration.



Capri Girl.

variety, with incomparable elegance and penetration.

Five years ago, when the only representative exhibition of his works which has thus far been held, was given in Boston, I remember with what human interest the hall seemed filled. It was as though one were witnessing some great levee or other ceremonial, crowded with beautiful and distinguished personalities, and murmurous with living voices. Nowhere in that assemblage did the note seem forced. It was not criticism, but an irresistible play upon words in which Mr. Whistler indulged when he looked at the "Carnation Lily, Lily Rose," and said, "Darnation Silly, Silly Pose." It is worth noticing that it is not in his portraits of men, but in his portraits of women, who illustrate far more histrionically the nervous tension of the age, that Mr. Sargent has painted his most unconventional compositions. And when his subject has permitted him to exchange ner-

vousness for repose, with what felicity he has seized his opportunity! There is not in modern portraiture a more satisfactory study in dignity and noble stateliness than his "Mrs. Marquand." On the other hand, the quality which is so well expressed in this canvas, while evidently accessible to Mr. Sargent when he is painting a single figure, escapes him on some other occasions when his task is more complicated. He could repeat the quiet pose of the "Mrs. Marquand" in his portrait of Lady Agnew, one of the most refined works he has ever painted, but in his group portraits, where poise is most needed, it is markedly absent. Sometimes it hardly matters. The "Mrs. Carl Meyer and Her Children," for example, is so captivating in its Gallic lightness of feeling, so dazzling in its technique, that it were futile to quarrel with its composition—an application to portraiture of the principle of spontaneity which we have seen in action in his early Venetian

sketches. "The Misses Vickers," which was painted in the middle eighties, some ten or twelve years before the "Mrs. Meyer," also justifies itself through the sheer charm of the effect which the painter has secured from his lawless arrangement of forms. But what of "The Three Graces," as by common consent it was called, the big canvas (representing Lady Elcho, Mrs. Tennant, and Mrs. Adeane, the daughters of Mrs. Wyndham) which created a furore in the Academy four years since? The uneasy balance of the thing was, in my opinion, only thrown into clearer relief by the presence of Watts's portrait of Mrs. Wyndham in the background, where Mr. Sargent had dimly indicated that fine souvenir of a modern exemplar of the grand manner. What of the other large group which he has since executed, "The Misses Hunter"?

They are interesting paintings. Mr. Sargent could not be dull if he tried. But they do not seem, like his single portraits, or even like one of his double portraits, "The Daughters of Asher Wertheimer," to be—there is no other word—inevitable. There is work in them finer than anything any of his contemporaries could do—and there is the sense of artifice and effort, of lines teased into relations to one another which, when he is himself, Mr. Sargent never discloses. The trouble, I take it, is that he is groping through the intricacies of a formula, a thing foreign to his genius, and, what is more, foreign to his time. The only artists who have ever succeeded in doing the sort of thing Mr. Sargent has latterly been trying to do in these groups of his, have been painters like Mignard, Rigaud,

Largillière, and the rest, in France, or like Sir Joshua, Gainsborough, and their school in England—men who have been born to a tradition half social and half artistic, and have therefore moved within its boundaries with unconscious ease. In his endeavor to reconcile the mode of the eighteenth century with the spirit of the twentieth, Mr. Sargent has "gone against nature," and, for once, his consummate ability has been set at naught. In other words, in these groups

he is not himself; and in being himself, as cannot be too often reiterated, resides a great part of his strength.

He is himself in his reading of character, in his design, and in his style. To say this is not to forget his indebtedness, where style is concerned, to other painters, even to Duran. I think there is something of Duran in his mere cleverness, which, like so much that is fluent and self-possessed in modern craftsmanship, could have been developed in Paris and nowhere else. The broad, slashing stroke of Hals has taught him something, it is fair



A Study.

to assume, and the influence of Velasquez in his work is sufficiently obvious. Yet there is not in all his painting the ghost of what it would be reasonable to call an imitative passage. The rapidity and *bravura* of Hals he recalls often enough, but never the Dutchman's blunt simplicity. The temperament of the racy old master and that of the cosmopolitan modern are poles apart. He revives sometimes, in terms of brush-work, the tradition of Velasquez, but it is not by brush-work alone that style is made; with the painter of "Las Meninas" and "Las Hillanderas," color is peculiarly important, and between color as he understood it, and



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John S. Sargent.

Mr. Sargent's, there is no connecting link. One is all limpidity and sober charm, even when it is in its higher keys. The other is sharp, vibrating, and, though always in good taste, never deep or tender. To see the point in a nutshell, compare the plangent brilliance of the costume in the portrait of Carmencita with the melting, bloom-like beauty of a dress worn by one of the *Infantas* of the Prado. The clear *timbre* of the older colorists, resonant and haunting, has always struck me as lying outside the scope of Mr. Sargent's art, if not, perhaps, incompatible with so militant and pyrotechnical a phenomenon. The differences between him and his illustrious predecessors go to the very root of the matter. If his prototype is to be looked for anywhere—though there is, to be sure, no great necessity for finding one—it must be in another modern, the Belgian, Alfred Stevens. He is no more a modern Hals or Velasquez than he is a modern Rembrandt or Botticelli, for he looks at life and art from a totally different point of view; not simply, or grandly, or tragically, or imaginatively, but with the detached, intellectual curiosity of a man of the world. He paints with a dexterity that is of the same modern, eclectic, and yet intensely individualized origin as his mental attitude. Of course he has profited by the great exemplars of technique. As a great technician he could not have done anything else.

He has his place in the hierarchy, the place of a portrait-painter, for all that the pictures mentioned above have such rare merit. The decorations in the Boston Public Library serve but to confirm this hypothesis. They represent a high ambition, they fill given spaces with impressive ideas eloquently expressed; but as decorations in the strict sense they want the unity which elsewhere Mr. Sargent so easily achieves. The strongest elements in them are elements of portraiture—the powerful characterization and varied handling of forms in the now famous frieze of Prophets, and certain specific embodiments, like

the *Astarte* or the *Moloch*, in the upper sections of the scheme at either end of the hall. It is as a portrait-painter that he stands head and shoulders above all his contemporaries, even his failures possessing an interest denied to many a clever painter's successes. Those failures he would probably be the first to acknowledge and deplore, and I dare say that they have been due to want of sympathy more than to anything else.

In the exhibition held at Boston this summer, of the fifteen or twenty portraits executed during his recent visit to this country, the good works and the bad ones were clearly those which had been done with enthusiasm and those which were perfunctory. If he had failed to wreak himself to good purpose upon some of his subjects it was because they had given him no such inspiration as that by which he was moved when he painted, for example, the large portrait of Colonel Higginson for the Harvard Union. To the making of that he had brought warm feeling, and he lifted it to an almost heroic plane. When he paints pot-boilers he is lost. Not his most elaborate portrait of a gorgeous personage, set in the most luxurious surroundings, has, if he has put nothing but mere workmanship into it, anything like the interest which attaches to some such sincere fragment as his sketch of the painter Helleu, working in the open air. His pencil portraits are uneven. They are only worthy of him when they reveal that caressing instinct for delicacy of linear effect which a long time ago he showed to such beguiling purpose in the sketch he painted of the wax bust at Lille attributed to Raphael. Yet in recalling the great mass of Mr. Sargent's work, I have been impressed by the comparative scarcity of portraits to which the word failure might in justice be applied—and by the disposition, moreover, of most of his successes to not merely fill the moment with their *éclat*, but to "wear well." Fortunate is the generation that is privileged to be painted by him!

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THE WORK OF
JOHN S. SARGENT
R.A.



CARMENCITA

THE WORK OF
JOHN S. SARGENT
R.A.

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

BY

MRS. MEYNELL



LONDON
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LIST OF PLATES

Carmencita

El Jaleo

Madame Gautreau

Miss Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose

Mrs. Boit

Children of E. D. Boit

George Henschel

Mrs. George Batten

Coventry Patmore

M. Léon Delafosse

The Hon. Laura Lister

The Hon. Victoria Stanley

Lady Agnew

Sir Thomas Sutherland

Gen. Sir Ian Hamilton (full length)

Gen. Sir Ian Hamilton (head only)

Lady Hamilton
Mrs. George Cornwallis-West
Miss Carey Thomas
Miss Octavia Hill
Mrs. Carl Meyer and Children
Lord Watson
Asher Wertheimer
The Misses Wertheimer
Alfred Wertheimer
Younger Children of Asher Wertheimer
Francis C. Penrose, F.R.S.
Lady Faudel-Phillips
A Venetian Interior
Miss Daisy Leiter
Lord Ribblesdale
Mrs. Endicott
Mrs. Joseph Chamberlain
Duke of Portland
Duchess of Portland
Lady Elcho, Mrs. Tennant, and Mrs. Adeane
The Ladies Alexandra, Mary, and Theo Acheson
Mrs. Charles Hunter
The Misses Hunter
Lord Russell of Killowen

The Hon. Mrs. Charles Russell
Mrs. Leopold Hirsch
W. Graham Robertson
Johannes Wolff
President Roosevelt
A Spanish Dance
Joseph Jefferson
Lady with White Waistcoat
Signor Mancini
H. G. Marquand
Mrs. Marquand
M. Paul Helleu
Bedouin Arab
Egyptian Girl
Italian with Rope
Egyptian Woman (coin necklace)
Capri Girl
Mrs. Meynell
Study: Profile
Study for a Portrait
Portrait Sketch

INTRODUCTORY NOTE



VEN the critic of some twenty years ago, to whom the drama of life seemed "literary" and therefore not fit for painting, must confess to an interest in the subject of a picture when that picture is a portrait. The painter's perception of the character of his sitter is an essential part of his work, even of his execution. There is an insight in portraiture of which no one is afraid to speak. Even when, in the last century, the crime of "literature" was discovered, this was not accused of "literature", and no man charged this kind of "reading" with that sin. Most justly did the portrait painter pass unrebuked.

To-day indeed we are disposed to admit within the sphere of the art of painting all things that the eye can reach, and its field is wide. The kingdom of the eye contains all that is simply visible of the history and drama of man, all his beauty, all the signs of his character, and the action and attitude of his passions : these things, as well as the "pattern" made by his figure and his furniture composed. It contains also what the imagination of the eye can see—the apparition, the vision, and the dream. The mere name of "vision" marks it as subject to the dominion of the eye.

That man pays to literature a disproportionate homage who assigns to it all the show and exposition of humanity in disaster and felicity; and does to art an answering wrong. Nay, because literature claims what is invisible and lodges within, art might well assert the greater right over what cannot be hidden but needs must make itself manifest, whether in the eyes of surprise, or in the movement of violence, or in the spiritual condition of a man, and the experience of his race, as they are noted in his aspect. These things are to be seen by a silent art.

Nor, as was said but now, has recent criticism—penultimate criticism for the present, and it may be new again not many years hence—denied this human and civilized intelligence to portraiture. It has even granted to the portrait painter, as master of one of the intelligent arts, the praise due to a master of the intellectual arts, calling him psychologist. It is, however, by a degree of violence that this name is given to a painter. Here indeed, something does seem to be taken from literature. Psychology must be expressed and stated in explicit words, and with explicit words painting has no need to deal. Therefore one may hesitate to name Mr. Sargent, as he has been named, a psychologist: that is, in his work, for obviously we are not to pass beyond the picture. He proves himself rather to be observant and vigilant, nay simple, as a great artist must be. How many and various qualities, mental and physical, meet to prepare that direct and single contemplation of the world might give us matter for surmise; for contemplation there is

—something more than observation; and something more than perception—insight.

Apart from this slight error (if it be one) of giving to painting the name of psychology, every interest is allowed by one consent to the subject of portraiture. The likeness of man or woman is a great thing to achieve; if it lives at all it lives so long! It gives long life, a life of ages, to all the incidents of this individual face, its age, its health, its consciousness, its race. It is evident that Mr. Sargent has keen sight for the signs of the races; there is as it were the knack of Spain in his "Jaleo", something neither Italian nor Oriental, but proper to the spirit of the populace of this one peninsula, a somewhat deep-toned gaiety, a laugh in grave notes, and a kind of defiance, at least in the women. If the men have the nature of tenors, the women there have the nature of contraltos. In the "Javanese Dancer" the flat-footed, flat-handed action of the extreme East—a grace that has nothing to do with Raphael—is rendered with a delightful, amused, and sympathetic appreciation: the long code of Italian conventions disappears: the slender Javanese dance has weight—a confession of gravitation, whereas the occidental dance makes light of it. All that is alien here, the painter sees in the quick. When Mr. Sargent paints an American—the portrait of Mr. Roosevelt, for example—the eye has the look of America, the national habit is in the figure and head. No caricaturist has so much as attempted this aspect, because the caricaturist apparently never sees it, but thinks he sees

something else—happily, for the real signs of nation and race are too fine and good for inhuman burlesque : we may be glad to see them reserved for worthy and in truth more humorous eyes. Every man in his humour is every man in the humour of his fathers and of the soil. In like manner, Mr. Sargent paints an Englishwoman with all the accents, all the negatives, all the slight things that are partly elegant and partly dowdy—one can hardly tell which of those two—the characteristics that remove her, further than any other woman, from the peasant and the land, further than an artificial Parisian : Mr. Sargent perceives these keenly, never forcing the signs, for force would destroy anything so delicate. It is perhaps almost necessary to have been an Anglo-Saxon child living abroad in order to have the nicest sense of the aspect of an English lady (I use the noun, of course, intentionally) ; if you have had that little experience—and it was Mr. Sargent's, *à propos*—having also had a child's profound apprehension of personality, you have the most perfect perception of her Englishism. There is one of Mr. Sargent's portraits, a most charming one, of a lady very slightly and beautifully faded, sitting, with her slender hands in view. There is nothing to connect her with Italy, and the fancy is quite gratuitous ; but she is so peculiarly English that one can hear her mispronounce, with a facile haste, some Italian word with a double consonant in it. Another Englishwoman's portrait, the masterly picture of Mrs. Charles Hunter, with its suggestion of refinement and fresh air, courage, spirit, enterprise and

wit, is subtly English. And purely French, with a French character lying out of the view of the caricaturist, is the fine clear portrait of Madame Gautreau, the firm and solid profile, with decision, not weakness, in its receding forehead and small chin. The Hebrew portraits present more obviously, but also not less subtly, the characters of race; so do all those, pictures or drawings, in which Italians are studied. The laugh of the young man pulling a rope is perfectly national.

The race, nevertheless, does not overpower the least of the personal traits that are, personally, worthy of record. Mr. Sargent takes at times a sudden view, and thus makes permanent, too singly, one aspect of an often altering face. It seems to be so, for example, in the portrait of Coventry Patmore, in which that great poet's vitality wears an aspect too plainly of mere warfare. Even here one may hesitate, conjecturing that some other eyes may see in this likeness traces of "the many movements" of a poet's nature. But "one thing at a time" is the right rule for much portraiture; and yet again, it has perhaps been obeyed here where it should not. Elsewhere the accident of a moment that is not important may be something too passing for the dignity of a portrait; but assuredly this is noted only when there has been nothing to note that has a graver claim to "immortality." I rather report another's murmuring than my own (the murmuring of one who prizes Mr. Sargent's genius in such a degree as no one can outdo) if I aver that he tells us, in a portrait, now and then, such a fact as that a man has or has not slept well. When he has something finer to show us, I do

not think Mr. Sargent shows us *that*; but the graver conditions of life are so visible to him, and their aspect is so plain in the reflection of his picture, that it is told of one portrait that a physician made a diagnosis from it and named a malady until then uncertain—a disorder that has a characteristic effect upon bearing and expression. The ordinary eye might see in that expression nothing but a kind of demonstrative health. It is moreover interesting, in the case of this portrait, to know that the painter, at work on one of the finest pictures of his wonderful gallery, a picture magnificently arranged, was keen as well as large of sight, and saw both the pictorial beauty of the accessories and the difference between the look of another woman of the world and the look of this one, who wears her jewels with an almost secret difference. If the story is true, well; if it is not true, it has been aptly invented by one who must know something of Mr. Sargent's manner of seeing and of perceiving what he sees. An example of the portrait of a moment that is full of spirit and action is that of Mrs. George Batten, which breathes the last note of a song—a note of Tosti's, one might guess. With this we may compare the repose of the standing portrait of Lord Ribblesdale, in which one hardly knows whether face or figure is more expressive of the poise of life—the unstable equilibrium by which a man is thus admirably erect, so that nothing stable and secure seems so upright, and nothing in flight more full of life. Another pause is that in the face of Eleonora Duse in the quick sketch in oils of which the reproduction is one of the

treasures of this book. The face is quite tranquil, so that other faces look uneasy in comparison, and the eyes under their sombre lids have, in this brief sketch, the most direct look in the world. The great tragedian gives in her portrait, as in her art, the impression of an incomparable sincerity, and faces us from the yonder side of the common human custom of intercepted, veiled, retreating or hesitating looks. She does not find these minor disguises to be worth while. Mr. Sargent's sketch is peculiarly moderate, and the reproduction happily keeps all the distinction he has made between the one large light on the forehead and the lower lights on the nose, cheek, and chin, so that it is the modelling of the forehead that is most important, but one part is as simple as another.

Those who would have refused to the art of painting—I think the idea began to be sent broadcast by the essay of a French critic dated some time after the middle of the nineteenth century or when the Romantique painters were, mostly, dead—those, I say, who debarred this art from dealing with any form of drama (for fear of “literature”) should consistently bar the attitude of action. The angel with the palm must not fly down to Tintoretto's Ursula leading her multitude of martyrs. Titian's tempestuous angel of the Annunciation must not run to the Virgin, with clapping wings and arm aloft under the cloud of an impatient sky; nor must his Dionysus spring to Ariadne from the car. Inasmuch as very few modern designers have the power of movement, this incapacitating rule would serve the turn of the time well enough, and no doubt has made shift to excuse the languor of those who

had not energy. No need to discuss now the inconstancy of that rule which allows a wheel to turn, or a fountain to play; a wheel to turn, but not the living pinion of Gabriel, and a fountain to play, but not the muscle of Hercules. Mr. Sargent heeds no such inauthoritative law; and when he has not the vital stillness of a portrait, he has such a spirit of movement as that of "El Jaleo" and "A Spanish Dance," the latter with its Goya-like, straight-topped throng in the background. He achieves not only the beauty of the attitude, but the power of the action, of the dance.

Amongst the pictures of children, the portrait of The Hon. Laura Lister takes its place with the most beautiful painted in all centuries since it was first held worth while to paint that childhood which the fathers and mothers of old were in haste to see securely past. Portraiture came comparatively late in the Italian schools—Venice apart—and seems to console or flatter their decline; and the portraits of children came last. But in Spain, Holland, Venice, and England, the great age was an age of portraits, and in our time the best work, since the landscapes of Norwich and Barbizon came to an end, is portraiture again. Portraits of childhood and an exquisite study of twilight and lantern-light, with the fine violet tints that artificial light lends to evening air, and with white as lovely in its coolness as the white of Titian in its gold, are united in the Garden picture, "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose". It is strange that any one affects to make light of truth and to look elsewhere for decoration, when nature and truth can look so beautiful.

The coming of a great painter is so rare, and his contemporaries are so much and so often taken by surprise by the annual exhibition of his genius, that it must be difficult to them to assure themselves of what he is. The work of Sir Joshua Reynolds is ranged and ranked, and every Englishman has the leisure of all his life, and of the longest of its years—the young years of education—for placing himself, in his turn, in the orderly ranks of admirers. But the works of a great living master appear and appear, they are scattered; comparison with masters of the past is too sudden, and there has not been time for a general consent. Nevertheless any student who has been called to give to the living painter the long and deliberate attention reserved in general for the dead, may perhaps be allowed to go in advance and to take on himself the usual office of numbers. Even so a great artist has no little privation, during his life, of the honours he is earning. We know that it was so with Reynolds, for the praise he had in his time is not to be compared with the homage he has in ours.

In the case of Mr. Sargent one supreme quality is so evident and so all-intelligible, that his work could never be neglected. It is a quality for all eyes and all intelligences. “The many cannot miss his meaning,” said James Russell Lowell of his own great contemporary author, “and only the few can find it.” The many cannot miss the life of Mr. Sargent’s painting, if the masterly method that brings that life to light is for students only to understand, or even only for painters. It is not necessary that the laity

should know much of this; and so much said about " technique " outside of the studios is surely little to the purpose. The artist does not join in the prattle with a public that is better employed in simple appreciation. Every art and craft has its methods for its own use. There must, for example, be much technique in the safe driving of a cab in Piccadilly, and assuredly we admire, and we trust and we profit; but the cabman keeps his technique to himself and makes no appeal whatever to his " fare ", does not ask that client to understand him. One professor only—the playwriter—seems inclined to cry out about his troubles—the difficulty of composing his scenes. If our friends in front did but know, he cries in effect, how exceedingly difficult it is to arrange these things, they would not complain of a tedious fore-scene; so much has to be doing behind; pray, a little more patience and technique! There is, however, more dignity in keeping separate places.

We spectators can hardly be anything else than ignorant, even with a smattering—ignorant of the art of the painter. A certain education, as has been said, makes us able to see well, and that is our art and needs our attention. It is our contribution, and we owe it. Life, light, form, and colour in a picture, and indeed in nature, must have our intelligent eyes; but there is something transcendent in the power of him who shows us the great quality of life so plainly that the simplest of us cannot but see. The life of Mr. Sargent's portraits is so much more than the trivial vivacity which

takes a careless eye, it is so truly vitality, that the eye meeting it, though it may be simple, must not be silly, must not be vulgar. Therefore when the comments of an English crowd seem dull to the listener, as they do, that crowd seems yet to retrieve itself, and makes no small amends, even at the Royal Academy, by generally saying of a splendid Sargent that it has life. As for colour, the love of it is with the greater number of us, but it needs definite education. Mr. Sargent is not distinctively a colourist, although he has truly exquisite colour, whether in his wonderful flesh, or in his whole system of shadows, or in some beautiful blue of a decorative sky. But I think a painter who is more distinctively a colourist pauses upon the colour of a shadow, for example, as Sargent does not seem to do. Rembrandt is called a chiaroscuroist rather than a colourist, but he is surely proved a colourist also, by his dwelling upon the colour of some shadowed background. Mr. Sargent's colour is rather something on the way to some beauty and truth of value and relation. Nature is full of passages of mystery, lapses of light and lapses of detail. A comparison is suggested to me of this beautiful "lost and found" in the shadowy world we see, with the momentary lapse of the lark's song when we hear him sing at his height, and its momentary recovery. There are in all natural scenes under our vision a hundred opportunities for pausing on the beauty of these retreats; the painter visibly delights in them—the colourist chiefly for their colour. Mr. Sargent has not this delight passionately, though he has it most delicately, and

we may suppose his chief felicity to be in perfect relations and in subtle modelling.

It is interesting to note that one art which seems to be deprived of these passages of mystery, has yet found a means to recover them—the art of sculpture. It is true that sculpture, like architecture, if it has no mystery in its making, has (being round and solid and invested by lights and shadows, and attended by distance) the mysteries of nature herself. Yet a mystery of the artist's own has a value and suggests his imagination. In Michelangelo's unfinished "Giorno" and in another great figure of his in Florence, half hewn from the block, the mystery is less his than ours; for it is due to the incomplete condition of a work greatly begun by an illustrious hand. But surely M. Rodin, in our own day, has given to the complete work a partial veil, a lost and found, a pause and an interval, full of life. It is a pleasure to associate this high contemporary name with that of Mr. Sargent, none the less because on his visit to London M. Rodin recognized the supreme master of painting in the portrait group of the three Misses Hunter, "that bouquet of flowers." From the strong and delicate modelling of Mr. Sargent's heads, a sculptor might make a bust.

"There are two methods of laying oil-colour which can be proved right :... one of them having no display of hand, the other involving it essentially and as an element of its beauty. Which of those styles," Ruskin writes to Dante Rossetti, "you adopt, I do not care." Perhaps if he had written this with

revision in a book, and not hastily in a letter, Ruskin would have changed the word "display" for one of more dignity. The beauty of the "power of hand" made evident stands clear of the soliciting action of "display" as we use that word currently. It is a manifestation indeed, and explicit, and the manifestation is veritably the beauty. "Display" seems to suggest a secondary grace, an afterthought, and once more to divide style, which Ruskin obviously did not intend to do. But apart from this hasty word, the saying has a significance not only for those who persist, against his own profession, in believing that Ruskin held only one method "proved to be right," and this the method he mentions first, attributing it to Holbein and Van Eyck; but for more serious readers and students. Of all the arts our impulse may be to protest that there are not two methods but many. Essentially, nevertheless, there are two. The equality of the two peaks, the two summits, has but lately been proved aloft in the highest places of music. So unlike are the two "methods" there, that one might say two arts of music, two muses, rather than two methods. For when the great modern art of emotional expression first shook the hand and took the breath (its earliest thrill or grimace, I think, may be seen in a picture in the lower church at Assisi), the other, the unshaken art, was not abolished. It continued, and having shown the Crucifixion in mosaic, the Passion in literature, the Lamentations in music, with a steadfast soul and no tremor, it achieved the purely perfect and beautiful melody of Mozart, which expresses nothing, the melody of the unbroken

heart. Music has to serve us with examples of the dual art because her examples are perfect. But the examples of painting also are true; and as the mind of art was divided, so also was her manner—the laying of oil-colour, as Ruskin says, has two right ways. The unchanging quarrel bickers on under changing forms and various names, from generation to generation, because the world is slow to confess that there are two right ways—for fear, perhaps, lest it should be committed to many. Manifestly one sect, being right, cannot convince nor even convict the other, this also being right. There has never been peace since the art of criticism began. That is, mere writers on art will not be friends, whereas we do not conceive that Hogarth had enmity of heart towards Velasquez, or Tintoretto towards Holbein. “Twain is the mind” of art, and her hand has two laws.

It need not be said, by-the-by, that beauty of execution is inseparable from all really fine painting, and that the work which has it not is not the best of either of two right and lawful schools; for it is of power, and not of beauty only, that Ruskin writes. Hogarth’s execution is very beautiful, but his “display” of power of hand is so suppressed as to escape some admiring eyes.

Mr. Sargent is eminent on the summit of one of these equal heights. He has indeed shown in modern times how high that height reaches—the height of the “power of hand” made manifest, the manifestation being an essential part of the beauty of that power. He is therefore one of the family of Velasquez, and no less than his chief heir.

A. M.

PLATES

EL JALEO



MADAME GAUTREAU



MISS ELLEN TERRY
AS LADY MACBETH



CARNATION, LILY
LILY, ROSE



MRS. BOIT



CHILDREN OF E. D. BOIT



GEORGE HENSCHER



MRS. GEORGE BATTEN



COVENTRY PATMORE



M. LÉON DELAFOSSE



THE HON. LAURA LISTER



THE HON. VICTORIA
STANLEY



LADY AGNEW



SIR THOMAS SUTHERLAND



GEN. SIR IAN HAMILTON
(FULL LENGTH)



GEN. SIR IAN HAMILTON
(HEAD ONLY)



LADY HAMILTON



MRS. GEORGE
CORNWALLIS-WEST



MISS CAREY THOMAS



MISS OCTAVIA HILL



MRS. CARL MEYER
AND CHILDREN



LORD WATSON



ASHER WERTHEIMER



THE MISSES. WERTHEIMER





ALFRED WERTHEIMER



YOUNGER CHILDREN OF
ASHER WERTHEIMER



FRANCIS C. PENROSE, F.R.S.



LADY FAUDEL-PHILLIPS



A VENETIAN INTERIOR





MISS DAISY LEITER



LORD RIBBLESDALE



MRS. ENDICOTT



MRS. JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN



DUKE OF PORTLAND



DUCHESS OF PORTLAND



LADY ELCHO, MRS. TENNANT
AND MRS. ADEANE



THE LADIES ALEXANDRA,
MARY, AND THEO ACHESON



MRS. CHARLES HUNTER



THE MISSES HUNTER



LORD RUSSELL OF
KILLOWEN



THE HON. MRS. CHARLES
RUSSELL



MRS. LEOPOLD HIRSCH



W. GRAHAM ROBERTSON



JOHANNES WOLFF



PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT



A SPANISH DANCE



JOSEPH JEFFERSON



LADY WITH WHITE
WAISTCOAT



SIGNOR MANCINI



H. G. MARQUAND



MRS. MARQUAND



M. PAUL HELLEU





BEDOUIN ARAB



EGYPTIAN GIRL



ITALIAN WITH ROPE



EGYPTIAN WOMAN
(COIN NECKLACE)



CAPRI GIRL



MRS. MEYNELL



STUDY: PROFILE

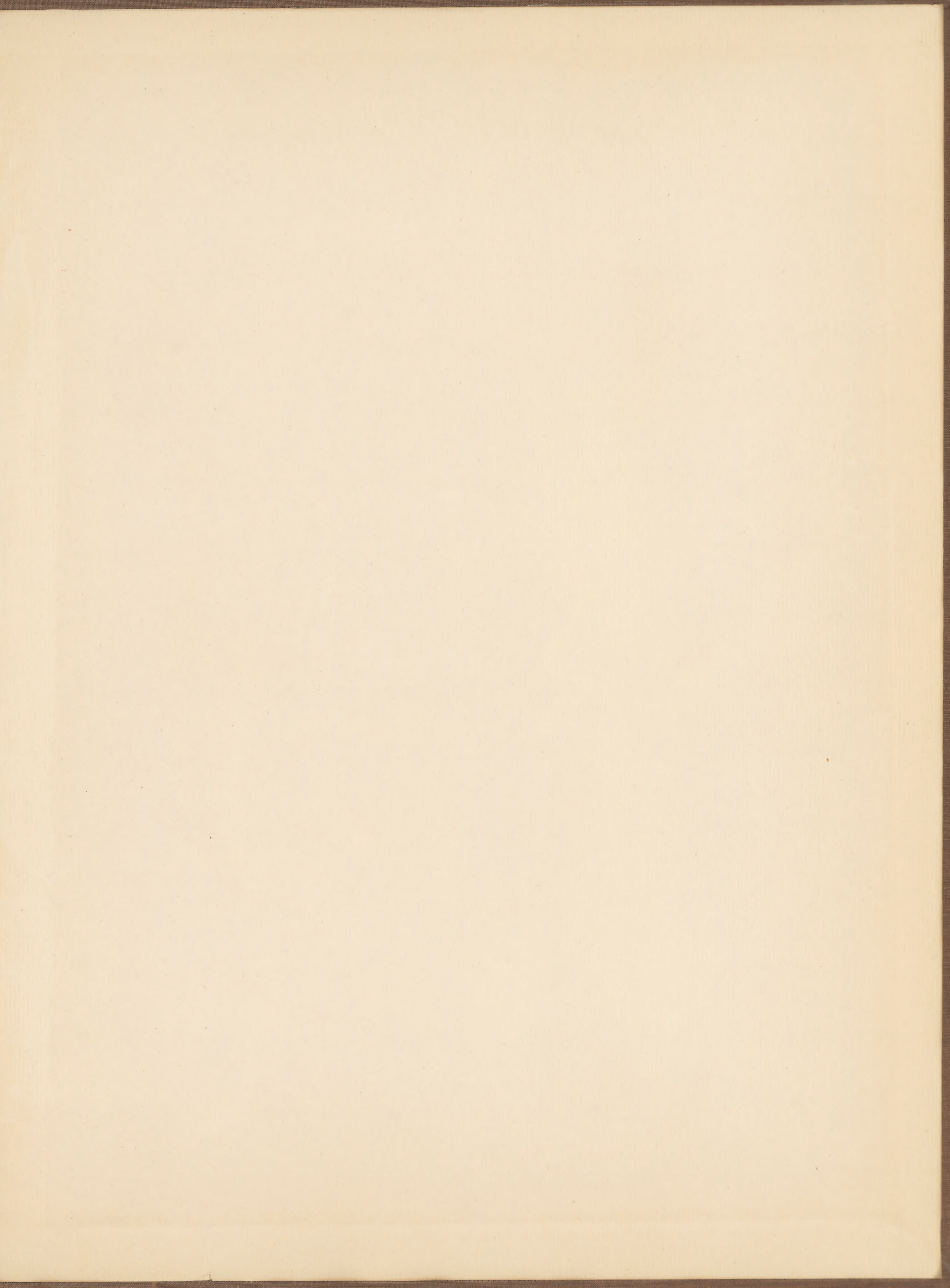


STUDY FOR A PORTRAIT



PORTRAIT SKETCH





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